

Encounters with Difficult Bosses: How Do You Cope?

Andrea Hall

Have you ever read a Dilbert cartoon and felt as if the pointy-haired guy was your boss? If so, you're not alone. Type "difficult boss" into the Google search engine and you'll get almost 3 million hits, many of which offer advice on how to deal with a challenging supervisor.

The difficult boss, unfortunately, is all too familiar, says Lynne Eisaguirre, president of Workplaces That Work in Golden, CO, and author of *The Power of a Good Fight: How to Embrace Conflict to Drive Productivity, Creativity and Innovation*. There are extremes on both ends, but the phenomenal boss, who is not only good at his or her job but also really knows how to manage people, is the exception. "We promote people because they're good at what they do," she explains, "but they're not necessarily good leaders." (For more on this, see "Making the Transition from Technologist to Manager" in the November/December 2006 *BI&T*.)

If you are confronted with a chronically difficult supervisor, you can either try to make it work by adjusting to the situation, or, if it is bad enough, put your effort into finding

a new position. Ideally, though, you can avoid the situation in the first place by spotting a difficult boss before you accept a job.

Make It Work

You've chosen to stay in your current position, either because the good outweighs the bad or simply because it is the wrong time to conduct a job search. So how do you deal with your challenging boss? "Employees need to be proactive," says Eisaguirre. "Don't wait for your boss to say something's wrong. Check in frequently and get clear directives about your role in the organization and your responsibilities."

Frank Magnarelli, former director of clinical engineering at Miami Children's Hospital, advises employees to "become recognized as one of your organization's most valuable employees." Avoid being viewed as a chronic complainer, show your customers respect, act and dress professionally, and increase your visibility within the organization by volunteering to work on ad hoc committees. "After you achieve this level of recognition, you may have the leverage you need to influence change," he says.

Check Points

Difficult bosses come in many forms, and each presents its own challenges and coping strategies.

Four common types are:

- ✓ The micromanager
- ✓ The conflict avoider
- ✓ The aggressor
- ✓ The incompetent

If you're dealing with a boss who's angry, "it's important to catch them when they're not screaming and yelling," Eisaguirre says. Find out what part of your boss's anger is your fault, and then make it clear that he or she needs to give feedback in a normal voice. If the aggressive behavior continues, go to Human Resources, or to your boss's boss.

How should you react if you truly feel your boss is not doing his or her job well (the incompetent boss)? Do your job as well as you can and cover yourself, and make sure others in the organization know you're doing a good job. Again, don't be afraid to speak with your supervisor's boss.

The incompetent boss plagued Ray Nielsen, who is retired from Allina Clinical Equipment Services in Minneapolis, MN, when he was

“The number-one reason people leave companies is their boss”



in field service. “I couldn’t get my supervisor to follow up with customer complaints that only he could solve,” he recalls. After a number of unanswered complaints, Nielsen went to his supervisor’s boss. His supervisor shrugged it off as inconsequential, but the boss “did force him to respond, and quickly too,” he says. “It never caused any further problems with my supervisor. I’d do it again if customer satisfaction was an issue.”

If your boss is a micromanager, you may just have to surrender to that, Eisaguirre says. Give constant updates, and hopefully you can beat him or her to the punch.

Magnarelli took a direct approach when confronted with a micromanaging boss. “I confronted him with the issue and told him that hospital surveys had shown that our clinical engineering program had much higher

customer and employee satisfaction ratings than any of his other departments,” he recalls. Magnarelli explained that those ratings were due, in part, to the fact that biomedical equipment technicians had “the authority to act independently when solving problems.” When his boss responded that “none of that mattered,” Magnarelli stood his ground and asserted that the right to manage according to his own philosophies “was a condition of employment.”

In retrospect, Magnarelli, now retired, says his response was probably neither appropriate nor constructive. In the end, he took the matter to the vice president, who changed his reporting relationship. However, he still believes in the direct approach. “Make an appointment to meet with your supervisor and be sure to rehearse what you are going to say,” he recommends. “Do not be accusatory or judgmental. Let your boss know how his or her actions affect you.” Magnarelli notes that many supervisors may not realize how their actions affect others and your discussion might enable them to see the problem.

Experts disagree on whether providing your boss with constructive criticism is an effective tactic, mainly because what is seen as “constructive” by one boss may only make things worse in another situation. Nielsen, who worked as a supervisor in the mid-1980s, asked his employees to evaluate him as part of their performance review. Because of this process, “we found a lot of ground for mutual respect and problem solving on a day-to-day basis.” He adds that all the comments he received were constructive, “sometimes painfully so.”

Mel Kleiman, president of Humetrics, Inc., however, believes that constructive criticism is a waste of time and that most bosses who are truly difficult “don’t really care.” He tells the story of a former client, a supervisor with a high turnover rate. Once the client’s verbal abuse of his employees was identified as the problem, he said, “I’m not going to change.” In a case like that, it may be best to just get out of the situation.

Good Boss/Bad Boss

Most employees find it easy to describe a good boss. “He or she provides tools for those reporting to him or her, and keeps the tools sharp,” says Nielsen. Describing a difficult boss is harder, because what’s difficult for one person, such as being challenged, may be an asset for another, offers Kleiman.

Eisaguirre divides difficult bosses into four main types. First, there’s the micromanaging boss, who hovers over you and doesn’t let you do your work. The second type is the conflict avoider, who doesn’t make difficult decisions and is unclear about your responsibilities. Third, there’s the aggressive boss—the pit bull—and the fourth is the incompetent boss, who is simply not good at doing his or her job.

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

The number-one reason people leave companies is their boss, says Kleiman. Of course, whether you decide to seek new employment will depend upon a number of factors, including other opportunities in the same city, willingness to relocate, and the job market.

In some cases, it may be worth staying with even the most difficult of supervisors. Some difficult bosses are brilliant, according to Eisaguirre. You may choose to put

up with a challenging boss “because you’re learning from them or because of the contacts they have in the field,” she says. At the same time, “no one should put up with abuse anywhere.” If you’ve tried to change your work dynamic without success, it may be time to look for a new job.

Before you make the leap, however, be honest with yourself that the problem isn’t your own conflict management skills or assertiveness. “There are a lot of aggressive people out there,” Eisaguirre says. “Be as skillful as you can at managing conflict.”

Interview Your Interviewer

The best tactic for dealing with a difficult boss is simply to avoid getting into the situation in the first place. Take steps during your job hunt that can help you spot a difficult boss *before* an offer is ever made. Eisaguirre recommends asking about the turnover rate in the position for which

you’re applying, and requesting to meet with potential coworkers to ask about the supervisor’s strengths and weaknesses. Magnarelli also advises asking the supervisor about his or her management philosophy. “If you don’t like the answer you get, or if it is obvious they have never given any thought to the matter, you should be wary and think twice before accepting the job,” he says.

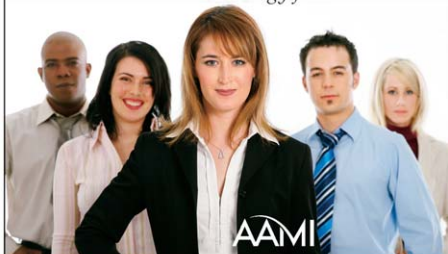
Naturally things can change—a potential boss may be putting on his or her best face for an interview, and once in a position you may have a change in supervisors that is beyond your control. Whether you discover on day one that you may be in a challenging situation or months or even years into a job one develops, realize that you are not trapped in an impossible situation forever. There is more to life than work, after all. ■

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